

# Outreach and Education



# The Connection Between Art and Science in Denali National Park and Preserve

By Annie Duffy

Artists have had a major impact on the creation and development of America national parks since the beginning of the national park movement (*Denali National Park and Preserve 2008*). Similar to Thomas Moran's contribution to the creation of America's first national park, Yellowstone National Park, the painter Belmore Browne was a strong advocate for the establishment of Mt. McKinley National Park, now known as Denali National Park and Preserve (Denali), in 1917. Over the years, many artists have supported the park and worked within its landscape to create powerful works that have merit not only as beautiful objects but also as important tools for interpreting Denali's natural history and its complex ecosystems.

In 2001, the park renewed its commitment to the arts and asked Kesler Woodward to serve as the park's first official artist-in-residence. The program has grown significantly over the past seven years. It is now entering a more mature phase where we are actively examining the merits of the program not only to artists but to the park as well.

The first western artists in the park were part of science expeditions. We are now actively exploring how artists work with scientists and address science in the park today. We are carefully examining the connection between art and science, how artists have played a role in the scientific work being conducted in the park, and how this connection may be further developed in the future.

## Artist-in-Residence Process

All visual artists are encouraged to apply for an open application call that is held annually. International applications are also accepted.

## Application Requirements

Prior to 2009, all applications were in hardcopy format and submitted via mail. This included: 1) a brief statement of intent, stating what the applicant hopes to achieve as a result of a residency at Denali; 2) a personal vita outlining artistic accomplishments, such as participation in juried and invitational exhibitions, solo exhibitions in galleries and public institutions, work included in museum, corporate, and public collections, artist fellowships and residencies, and other honors; 3) no more than six professional quality digital images (all images must be in JPEG format, must be at a resolution of at least 300 dpi when sized at 4" x 6" and no individual image file may exceed 2 MB); and 4) In addition to the image files, artists include a list with thumbnail views of each image, and its title, medium, size, and date of completion.

In 2009 we moved to an online application system and some formatting requirements changed, such as the minimum image resolution and file size. The link to the application system is available at <http://arts.alaskageographic.org>. The annual application deadline remains the same, it continues to be October 31 for residencies to take place the following summer season.

**Figure 1. Detail of "Drifting Clouds, Denali" by Kesler Woodward. Oil on canvas; 24" H x 30" W.**





Photograph by Missy Woodward

**Figure 2.** Artist-in-residence Kesler Woodward sketches at the creek right next to the East Fork Cabin.



Photograph by Eric Nancarrow

**Figure 3.** "Glacial Run-off" by Ree Nancarrow. Fiber; 36" H x 21.5" W.

## Selection Process

For 2010, the program continues to be open only to visual artists. As there is currently another program for professional photographers, the 2010 program will not accept applications from artists working in the medium of photography. We expect to include a wide range of other types of media in future years.

A panel of artists and NPS personnel appointed by the superintendent of the park reviews applications from professional artists annually. Selection is made on the basis of required entry materials, vision, new and innovative ways of responding to the park, and recognized accomplish-



Photograph by Chris Arend

**Figure 4.** "Baby Raven Trio" by Rachelle Dowdy. Mixed media; 20" H x 20" W x 18" D.

ment as demonstrated in those materials. Up to four artists are accepted annually. Over 54 applications were received in 2008.

## Residency Experience

The Artist-in-Residence program offers professional artists the opportunity to pursue their work amidst the natural splendors of Denali. The park currently provides the use of the historic East Fork Cabin for ten-day periods from June through August. Other accommodations may be available in the future. No stipend is provided.

The East Fork Cabin, also known as the Murie Cabin, was the base from which naturalist Adolph Murie conducted his landmark study of wolves, sheep, and predator/prey relationships in the park from 1939-41. Built in the late 1920s by the Alaska Road Commission, the Murie cabin is located 43 miles into the park, just off the park road, in a dramatic setting on the East Fork of the Toklat River between Sable Pass and Polychrome Pass. A rustic but well-equipped base from which to work and explore, the 14 ft x 16 ft cabin has an outhouse, propane heater, range, oven, refrigerator, bunk beds, and a full complement of cooking equipment. There is no electricity or running water, but water jugs may be replenished at ranger stations and visitors' facilities, and showers are available at the Toklat Ranger Station, 12 miles from the East Fork cabin. Artists chosen must be comfortable in a wilderness setting.

## Residency Requirements

Selected artists are expected to give one public lecture about their body of work and artist approach. After the residency is completed, artists-in-residence donate a newly created piece of art to the park collection that reflects their experience in Denali.

## Connecting with Science

As part of the connection with science that is currently being explored, there are two specific instances currently in development.

Planning for a special exhibition entitled "Ascension:

Exploring the Art of Denali” at the University of Alaska Museum of the North is now underway. The exhibit will feature art work from Denali’s artist-in-residence collection and writings from selected scientists about how specific pieces enhance scientific understanding. The purpose of the exhibit is to show how the two fields are connecting in Denali, and how they are both valuable avenues to increasing our understanding of subarctic ecosystems and the world as a whole. The exhibition will open in October 2009 and will relate to the “*The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*” film by Ken Burns, which is planned to premier on local PBS stations in September 2009.

Three new arts-related field seminars were offered through the Murie Science and Learning Center during Summer 2009. The field seminars were led by artists, and two focused on connections between art and science in Denali. The field seminars were: Knowledge Informs Art: Drawing inspiration from Denali, June 15-17, 2009, with Alaska artist Karin Frazen; Landscape Painting, June 18-21, 2009, with Alaska artist David Mollett; and Denali Field Journaling, August 7-9, 2009, with author Tom Walker.

Other instances are also in development and being researched. This is a new direction for the program, and appropriate documentation is being created.

#### *The Importance of Continued Interaction of Art and Science in Denali*

There is a great deal of literature on the art and science connection, but one particular quote is especially useful in our endeavor:

*So much great art has come from artists interacting with scientists—perspective, color theory, dynamism, constructivism come quickly to mind—that one wonders what increased interaction might bring. (Root-Bernstein 2004)*

Although the quote focuses on what science brings to art, it is widely acknowledged that science also benefits greatly.

In recent years, researchers have teamed up with artists

to close the gap between art and science. Art and science were once strongly intertwined because observational data and experimental setups could only be rendered by hand, but the connection has generally languished for the last half of the twentieth century. However, the introduction of photography and modern imaging technology to the lab and the field has made capturing images routine. As a result, the aesthetic process of carefully producing images can lead a researcher to examine and think about a topic. Collaborations between scientists and artists serve

to help make science more accessible to the public, help researchers to think beyond their own area of science, and benefit science by generating creativity. Examples of these collaborations can be found throughout the world, including important centers of science such as the University of California, Los Angeles, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Montana State University (Felton 2003).

Increased interaction between the two disciplines in Denali will not only aid artists and scientists directly, but will also help broaden our understanding of the park—its



Photograph by Chris Alvord

Figure 5. “East Fork of the Toklat River” by David Mollett. Oil on board; 30” H x 40” W.



history, geography, and all that is contained in its environment. It will aid the park in communicating to the public about the important research being conducted in Denali. As our understanding increases, we can more effectively communicate and educate the public about this unique land.

### For additional information:

Visit <http://arts.alaskageographic.org> for more information about the Denali artist-in-residence program, including program application and history.

An online gallery of artist-in-residence artwork can be found at <http://www.alaskageographic.org/static/168/artist-in-residence--gallery>.

Visit <http://www.alaskageographic.org/static/179/arts-field-courses> for a list of upcoming arts courses and enrollment information.

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### REFERENCES

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#### Felton, Michael J., and Rachel A. Petkewich. 2003.

*Scientists Create Bonds with Artists. Analytical Chemistry.* 75(7):166A-173A.

#### Root-Bernstein, Robert. 2004.

*ArtScience: The Essential Connection.* Leonardo 37(2):93-4.



Photograph by Chris Arend

Figure 6. "Denali" by Margo Klass. Mixed media; 30" H x 20" W x 9.5" D.